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ABSTRACT

Fourteen learning disabilities (LD) teachers and 17 counselors at 31 secondary schools completed a questionnaire concerning their roles in preparing students with learning disabilities for postsecondary education. The open-ended questionnaire covered the following topics: who has primary responsibility for providing transition services, what services are provided to all students including students with learning disabilities by both learning disabilities teachers and counselors, how frequently do learning disabilities teachers and counselors meet with one another concerning the needs of students with learning disabilities, and what are the major unmet needs of learning disabilities students. Findings indicated that 43 percent of the LD teachers said they had primary responsibility for providing postsecondary guidance and 24 percent of the counselors said they had primary responsibility. About half of both the learning disabilities teachers and counselors indicated that they met at least once or twice a month. Concerning identification of unmet needs for LD students, 71 percent of the LD teachers identified transition-related types of needs whereas only 18 percent of counselors identified transition needs. (Contains 11 references.) (DB)

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Conversations with a Learning Disabilities Teacher and a School Counselor: Working As Partners

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Conversations with a Learning Disabilities Teacher and a School Counselor: Working As Partners

This study evolved from conversations between two authors, a learning disabilities teacher and teacher educator, and a counselor and counselor educator. Our first conversations occurred when we served on a college committee whose purpose was to determine eligibility for accommodations for college students with learning disabilities. We were faculty members in our respective fields coming from field based work settings, and served as coordinators of an assessment center in the college. Therefore, we brought both a personal and professional background to our conversations.

Our conversations evolved from our concerns about the lack of services available for students with learning disabilities in the college setting and because of the lack of knowledge these students had regarding their disability as well as with their lack of ability and comfort in advocating for themselves. In working with these students, it was apparent that although they often credited one-on-one contact with an learning disabilities teacher, and sometimes a counselor as being helpful, they had virtually no training in dealing with the realities of the transition they made to higher education. Yet, transition to work planning has been mandated since 1984 (Will) as a major federal initiative, and since the reauthorization of PL 94-142 as IDEA in 1991, which mandates that a transition plan must be included for each student in their Individual Education Plan (IEP) no later than age 16. We were impressed with the fact that these students persevered despite great difficulties. As our conversations continued, a more critical concern emerged: Who, if anyone, was responsible for helping the students with learning disabilities transition to a higher education setting? Learning disabilities teachers and counselors, both of whom

have sincere concern and interest in assisting individual learning disabilities students became the target audience to answer the question, and to explore their roles and responsibilities in developing transition plans. We wanted to determine the extent to which they consulted and communicated with each other to meet the postsecondary planning needs of students with learning disabilities.

Based on experiences, observations and conversations with learning disabilities teachers and counselors, in a wide variety of settings, we became aware that daily constraints often interfere with these professionals' ability to deliver the best services to individual students. For learning disabilities teachers, lack of time to individualize instruction is one constraint. Attempting to fulfill all the expected competencies of a learning disabilities teacher (DLD/CEC, 1992) may also be seen as a constraint impacted by lack of time. Learning disabilities teachers face another constraint when they have to serve in the role of a regular education teacher instead of operating under a legitimate service delivery model, such as taught in teacher-training programs which include resource, pull-out, self-contained, and mainstreamed, now, inclusion settings (Alley & Deshler, 1979; Lerner, 1993; Smith, 1994). Problems and conflicts arise when learning disabilities teachers try to meet administrative demands for delivering regular education curriculum in a special education setting, thus changing the role for which they were trained. For example, at the high school level, the learning disabilities teacher may be required to teach science in the resource room, using the same curriculum and required text as students in the regular classroom, when in fact, the mainstreamed class would be the more appropriate setting. Since learning disabilities teachers usually do not have the required certification to teach subject areas, their ability to individualize instruction for their students with learning disabilities is compromised. Other

constraints include lack of time to meet with content area teachers to discuss appropriate accommodations in that subject, the inclusion of multiple disabilities in the same classroom, and in many cases lack of support personnel such as a paraprofessional.

Constraints facing many counselors, especially at the high school level, include high student-counselor ratios, and responsibilities associated with class scheduling, testing, discipline, and greater need for crisis management. These constraints prevent counselors from delivering to individual students the services necessary to meet their academic, personal, and career needs — which include transitioning into postsecondary settings such as higher education. In addition, with today's more diverse student population, differing family structures, and many other factors, there are many more and serious problems than was true for previous generations of high school students. These constraints place more demands on the use of the counselor's time. Despite differing roles and common constraints faced by learning disabilities teachers and counselors, both groups of professionals, with an interest in the welfare of students, would benefit from collaboration which would help them better meet the needs of their students.

Students with learning disabilities often receive their education along with non-disabled students, and many of their basic academic needs are met in the regular classroom as for their peers. However, while special academic needs may be met in a resource room, other special needs occasioned by their disability may not be met. For example, who is involved in transition planning and who then counsels these students to insure a "good fit" with their disability needs (Aune & Johnson, 1993; NICHCY, 1993)? Although counselors are generally responsible for providing counseling for postsecondary planning, they do not necessarily take into account or

understand the effects of the disability (LDA Newsbrief, 1991; Satcher, 1993). Likewise, learning disabilities teachers, intent on helping the student with learning disabilities experience success and finish school, may not be prepared to assist the student with postsecondary plans. In fact, the learning disabilities student may fall between the cracks. It may be that both or either professional trusts that the other is taking care of the student's transition needs. Therefore, the following questions guided this study.

Research Questions

1. Since learning disabilities students make up the largest percentage of students with disabilities enrolled in college, who helps them make postsecondary plans while in the K-12 setting?
2. What transition planning and assistance is provided?
3. Does this assistance take into consideration their special needs?
4. How can services to students with learning disabilities be improved through the encouragement of collaboration between learning disabilities teachers and counselors?

Method

This pilot study involved 14 learning disabilities teachers (45%) and 17 counselors (55%). These 31 respondents completed a questionnaire prepared by the authors to answer the research questions. Twenty-five high schools serving grades 9-12 (81%), two schools serving grades 6 to 12 (6%), and four schools serving grades 8 to 12 (13%) were represented in the responses. Both urban and rural schools in the southeast were sampled and ranged in size from 400 to 1950 students. A minimum amount of demographic data was requested to facilitate honest responses. Individuals names of participants and schools were not requested. Basic

demographic information about the respondents and their school included position held (learning disabilities teacher or counselor), school size, and grade level.

The respondents were practitioners in the field enrolled as graduate students within the last two years who had several years of school experience. Both learning disabilities teachers and counselors were fairly evenly distributed. With few exceptions, the respondents were not practitioners in the same school. Only teachers whose primary responsibilities were working with students with learning disabilities were included as learning disabilities teachers, even though in some cases they were called "Interrelated." The open-ended questionnaire covered the following major topics: who has primary responsibility for providing transition services, what services are provided to all students including students with learning disabilities by both learning disabilities teachers and counselors, how frequently do learning disabilities teachers and counselors meet with one another concerning the needs of students with learning disabilities, and what are the major unmet needs of learning disabilities students.

Results

For high schools in the southeastern part of the state, the major results follow. In response to who is responsible for providing postsecondary training assistance, 43% of the LD teachers said they had primary responsibility and 24% of the counselors said they had that responsibility. In addition, 43% of the learning disabilities teachers and 41% of the counselors indicated that cooperative efforts existed to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. Both learning disabilities teachers (50%) and counselors (47%) indicated that they met at least once or twice a month. These contacts between counselors and learning disabilities teachers were on an as needed basis for individual students or brought about

because of the IEP reviews.

The results of the survey confirmed that learning disabilities teachers and counselors were aware generally of the services that each provided in their high school and indicated that though limited, some postsecondary planning assistance was among the services provided. Learning disabilities teachers clearly worked with students in areas of weakness, focusing particularly on improving academic success in the classroom. Counselors indicated that postsecondary planning assistance activities included activities to meet graduation requirements, college choice and application related services, as well as some personal and other counseling services. Most frequently, counselors provided specific services to students with learning disabilities when requested. Learning disabilities teachers (64%) and counselors (94%) indicated that learning disabilities students have access to postsecondary planning assistance just as do regular students. However, there was no indication that this assistance routinely addressed how the student should consider their disability in the context of the decisions they were making.

In response to the identification of unmet needs for learning disabilities students in their setting, 71% of the learning disabilities teachers identified transition related types of needs for learning disabilities students. The learning disabilities teachers identified the need for more information regarding college and technical school options, community based educational opportunities, and transition services. The other learning disabilities (29%) teachers identified academic success variables such as appropriate modifications, appropriate academic standards for students with disabilities, more time to plan instruction, and more information about new ways to enhance learning.

The counselors (18%) less frequently identified transition related needs of

learning disabilities students and more frequently identified academic, adjustment, or staff development types of needs (82%). Among the transition needs identified by counselors were job placement and continuous career development services. The academic and other needs identified by counselors were development of reading skills, more course electives, and proper accommodations and more student involvement, as well as in-service training for staff.

Discussion

Although both learning disabilities teachers and counselors had a clear understanding not only of their specific role in school, but also of the role of the other, there seemed to be a lack of comprehension of how their job roles could be integrated to meet transition needs and therefore greatly increase the probability of meeting learning disabilities students' specific needs. Without this comprehension collaborative partnership will remain elusive.

However, all too frequently, each professional worked in isolation. Although students technically had access to information, they had no assistance either in integrating that information regarding the nature of their disability or in taking a critical look at post secondary options for their best interests.

Our findings indicated that learning disabilities teachers are more aware of the transition needs of students than are the counselors probably because counselors are expected to fulfill so many different and time-consuming functions. An observation shared by a counselor provides some insight. This counselor responded to the question of unmet needs for learning disabilities students by stating that these students need extensive and continuous career development guidance but that most students get only "piecemeal" transition and career information.

For the researchers, the question became what is the critical knowledge that

must be in place to meet transition needs in a collaborative effort between learning disabilities teachers and counselors. To identify this essential knowledge the researchers suggest the following questions: What are the career development needs of students? How does a student's specific disability impact on these needs? Then, how can the learning disabilities teacher's knowledge and the counselor's knowledge be integrated into the student's IEP ?

It is the exception rather than the rule to find either the counselor or learning disabilities teachers in advocacy positions for students with learning disabilities concerning their specific transition planning needs. Therefore, the requirement to develop an IEP for each identified student becomes the mechanism that most consistently provides potential for collaboration.

To identify ways in which to facilitate the development of collaborative relationships, the researchers bring to attention two documents which could help bridge the gap between these two professional groups. The first, the National Occupational Coordinating Committee (NOICC, 1992), clearly identifies the counselor's responsibilities regarding the career development competencies that high school students need to achieve. The second, the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) (LDA Newsbief, 1994), clearly identifies the learning disabilities teacher's responsibilities in providing transition needs including career development to students with learning disabilities. Thus both professionals have responsibilities that are related to the transition needs of students with learning disabilities . Transition planning is mandated by the IDEA and implemented through the IEP which our study confirmed is the logical and viable mechanism for collaboration.

The learning disabilities teacher has the most direct and consistent contact

with students with learning disabilities, and continual involvement with IEPs. Since, according to our survey these teachers have greater awareness of transition needs, then they are in the best position to initiate contact with the counselor to discuss the status of specific students regarding the impact of their disability on transition needs.

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